

Lessons from the Pyrenees (4) – hydro dams and tracks

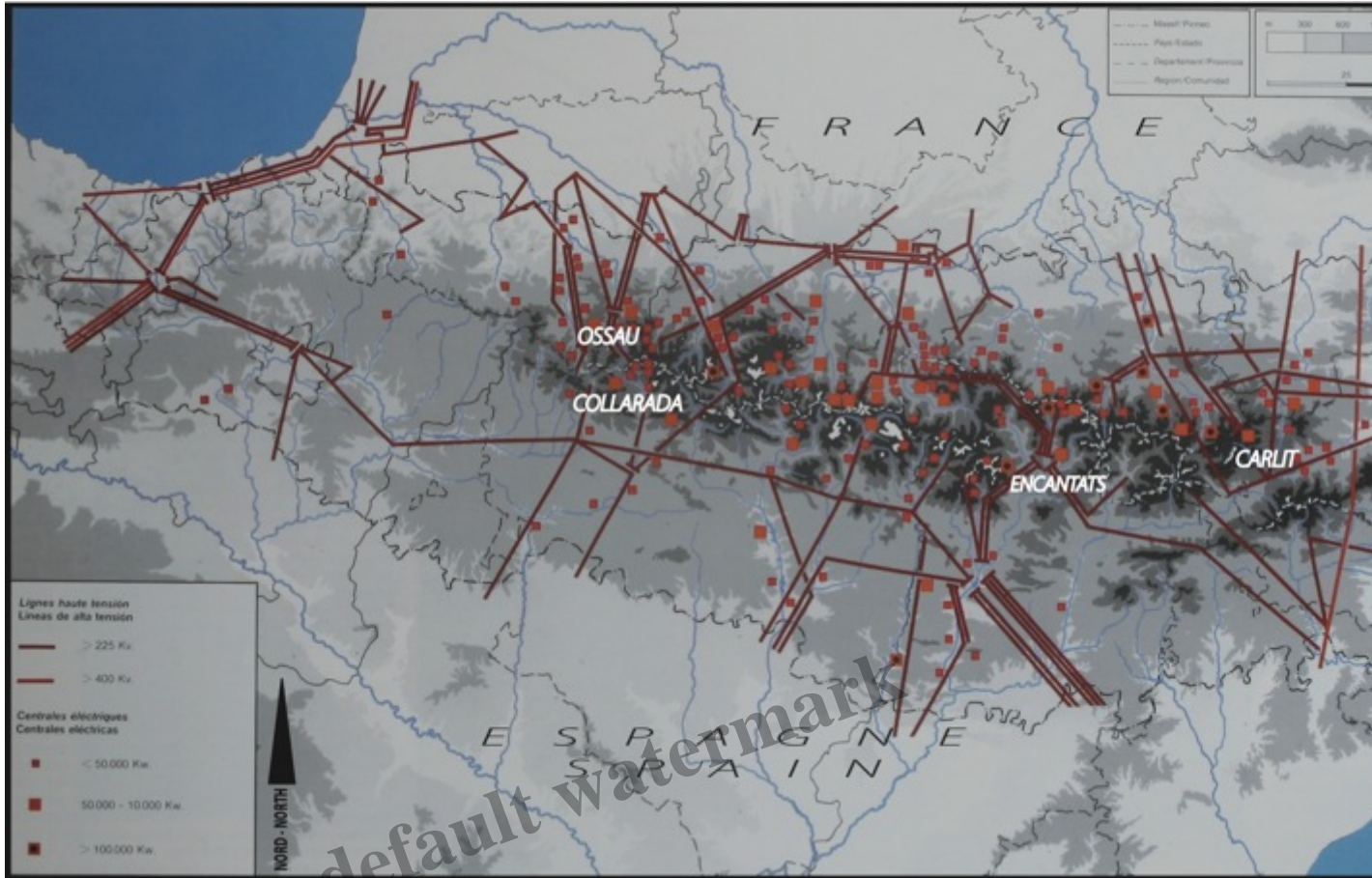
Description



While the central Pyrenees has many beautiful natural mountain lakes, there has been significant hydro development for over 100 years and many lakes have been created or extended by dams. We came across hydro schemes on many days of our two week walk, even in remote places.



Dam by Arremouli Refuge



Map credit Journal of Alpine Research

In an interesting article ([see here – its in English!](#)) – the history of hydro development in the Pyrenees has many parallels with Scotland – Jean Francois Rodriguez argues that hydro schemes, rather than deterring people from visiting what is often portrayed as a pristine mountain wilderness, have actually helped promote mountain tourism. They have done this, he argues, by helping to make remote areas more accessible but also by forming visitor attractions in their own right.

Applying this argument to Scotland, one could end up concluding that the dozens of run of river hydro schemes which have been constructed over the last ten years should provide the basis for a further boom in tourism! That they won't is shown by some important differences in the landscape impact of the schemes we saw within and around the Pyrenean National Parks compared to those in Scotland's two National Parks. This post takes a look at some of the evidence on the ground.



Power station and pipe on Sarra Reservoir above Sallent to Galliego – the road ends at the reservoir

We saw several examples of poor hydro developments in the Pyrenees, particularly near public roads. The more remote schemes however have usually been constructed **WITHOUT** the creation of any vehicular access tracks and as a result their impact on the landscape and recreational experience is significantly different to the schemes we have in Scotland.



Brazato Reservoir at c2000m altitude above Banos de Panticosa on the GR11

While the drawdown scars on the Embalse de Brazato were little different, and just as ugly, as those you can see on any Scottish hydro reservoir, what was different was what you could see below the dam:



The GR11 below the Embalse del Brazato. There is no vehicle access track – and spot the water pipe

Access to or from these reservoirs is by footpath, often very rough, and the experience therefore is very different to walking along a bulldozed hill track. As a result, unless you have looked at the map carefully and spotted that a lake en route has been dammed, the reservoir itself can come as a surprise. To put it another way, the impact of these hydro reservoirs, is localised.



I only spotted the pipeline on the hillside below the Embalse del Brazato after we crossed it lower down. In Scotland, partially led by the example of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, we are now burying these pipes but at the same time have been creating construction tracks which are then left permanently in place. Which is worse, having a pipe above ground or a track?



Another hydro scheme pipeline leading down to Banos de Panticosa

The answer to the question which is worse, above ground pipelines or tracks, depends partly on how the pipeline is constructed – raised pipelines have a massive landscape impact – and the extent to which pipes and tracks are concealed by vegetation.



Raised pipeline within the Ben Lui Wild Land area with Ben Lui behind

Unfortunately in Scotland, we have both, raised pipelines accompanied by tracks in open landscapes and, to add to the injury, pylons too! Walk an hour and a half west from the A82 in Glen Falloch and you are met with the scene in the photo above. The landscape impact is far worse than anything I saw in the Pyrenees – our National Parks should be learning from abroad.

The differing landscape impact of the hydro schemes in the Pyrenees is explained by several factors all of which are under human control and could be adopted in Scotland if there was the political will.

First, while new roads were created to build some of the schemes in the valleys (opening up access and therefore tourism) those in more remote places have generally been constructed using cableways or more recently, for small dams or dam extensions, helicopters.

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The unfinished dam above the Embalse de Respomuso, with Grande Fache behind – the line on the photo is a rough path, unsuitable for vehicles, not a track

The unfinished dam above the Respomoso refuge (accessed by a two and a half hour walk up a path, not a track) is a planning disaster which would, if completed, totally change the character of the beautiful upper section of this valley. It appears however to have been constructed without ANY new access infrastructure. If hydro dams in the Pyrenees, even in disastrous cases, can be constructed and maintained without tracks, they could be in Scotland. Its a matter of choice, but, instead of taking decisions which protect the landscape, back in Scotland the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority has led the run of river construction track free for all which which has now spread out to desecrate so much of the Highlands. Its not necessary and our planners and planning authorities need to be held to account.

In fact there are good examples from Scotland of how things could be done as they are in the Pyrenees. Historically cableways were used to construct the Blackwater reservoir dam – at the time

the largest in the world – and the Aonach Mor ski development was constructed without tracks but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. They need to be made the rule, particularly in our National Parks and National Scenic Areas.



The Respomuso dam, a Spanish equivalent of Loch Sloy, but 2.5 hours from a vehicle track. Note the construction spoil below the dam.

Second, within the Pyrenean National Parks there has been a deliberate to clean up the remains of construction infrastructure, for example by removing old cableways. Our National Parks should be doing the same in Scotland but including access tracks in this.

Third, because the Pyrenees are far more forested than Scotland and have a scrub zone, the landscape impacts of their hydro schemes are reduced.



Resposuso reservoir, early morning, with trees down to the shoreline

Where land was heavily grazed, the impacts of the reservoirs were much greater, as in Scotland:



Barrage d'Ossoue in the upper part of the Vallee d'Ossoue west of Gavarnie below the Baysellance where we saw large flocks of sheep (there was also a track to this dam).

Our National Parks need to be requiring developers not just to plant a few token trees around power houses, intakes and short sections of track, but be looking at how the landscape impact of the whole can be minimised and, if it can't, be refusing consent.

Fourth, we saw evidence that more care is taken about the appearance of the hydro dams/intakes in Scotland so they blend in more with the local landscape..



Note how both sides of the (newly extended) dam walls at the Embalse de Bachima Alto, by the new Hut on the GR11, have been faced with stone



Another stone faced intake, above the Bachima reservoir on the GR11, unfortunately spoiled by a concrete topping

While hydro schemes in the Pyrenees are far from perfect, I hope this post shows that were our National Parks and other Planning Authorities to look elsewhere for examples of best practice, we could have avoided much of the landscape disaster which has been caused by current approaches to hydro schemes by officialdom in Scotland. While it may be too late to reverse the consents to run of river hydro schemes which have been agreed in inappropriate locations like Glen Affric, its not too late to insist that the ongoing impact of these schemes should be reduced by removal and narrowing of inappropriate and ugly access tracks learning from what has happened in the Pyrenees. Nor is it too late to stop schemes which are still in the pipeline such as the seven new schemes proposed for Glen Etive (which Parkswatch will cover shortly).

Category

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Tags

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Date Created

July 29, 2018

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